

Archdiocese of Armagh



Section 1

Introduction - Process and Methodology:

In response to the Rome 2023 Synthesis “A Synodal Church in Mission” and its request to reflect on “the convergences already reached,” the Archdiocese of Armagh gathered in five regional centres during February and March 2024. In “A Synodal Church in Mission” each local Church was asked to “focus on the questions and proposals that were considered most urgent” and to “deepen the conversation on the issues both pastorally and theologically”.

The reflection question posed nationally was adapted to make it more accessible. The question therefore posed was, “*How can you imagine the life of your parish faith community where all are welcome and each baptised person is co-responsible for the Church in different ways?*” The suggested meeting outline was also changed, to include input on baptism and its relevance to ministry, discipleship, and co-responsibility, to more effectively scaffold the conversations more effectively. This amendment, and the use of prayer centred on Ephesians 4, provided a framework for participants and helped create greater understanding and insight-

Although gatherings were well attended those participating were mainly persons who were already involved in parish life and therefore not representative of a broader demographic diversity. There was, however, a noticeable increase in the participation and involvement of clergy. There was an air of positivity around the ‘Conversation in the Spirit’ methodology. It was universally lauded as it connects people on a deeper level and generates vibrancy and hope. Despite the obvious benefits of the methodology those who attended had trouble imagining a new Church reality. There was universal acknowledgement that significant change is needed but conversations lacked sufficient clarity around how such change could be imagined. The majority of those gathered found it difficult to move beyond existing structures and current hierarchical realities.

Youth:

Youth was the most prominent issue to emerge from the consultation with an urgent call for renewed outreach to young people. There was a tangible sense of “angst” expressed in relation to young people’s absence from faith communities. Most attendees were middle-aged and older and this may account for the lack of clarity that existed around how the Church should accompany young people. There was an honest acknowledgement that conversations around youth ministry were often held without young people. More effort will be needed to create spaces for young people to engage in dialogue with the Church.

One gathering was attended by a small, but committed, group of young people and, as a result, this meeting had a different feel to it. They brought vibrancy, strength of voice, and a particular tone to

the conversation. These young people articulated more succinctly what is needed to make the Church more open, welcoming, and relevant to them and their life circumstances. A strong desire to engage with and empower young people emerged along with a call for the Church to allow them to take on greater responsibility at younger ages.

Across all gatherings, the urgency of the task was clear and with this came a frank acknowledgement of the significant challenges that exist in reaching out to the young. Many believe young people do not feel heard and that they have largely disengaged from Church life. In one gathering we heard that the Church had, “lost connection with a generation” and that “rebuilding has to be in community not in Church.” There was a sense that young people are simply not present in faith communities anymore and that this represents a significant barrier. Social and digital mediums afford opportunities to engage meaningfully with young people. Young people themselves could be agents of change and evangelisation in this respect.

Consensus emerged around the need to develop opportunities and the creation of spaces for young people to engage. Such spaces, many thought, must be safe and resonate with young people themselves, they must be designed to foster a sense of belonging and importantly empower them to become involved in the Church's mission. The younger generation must be allowed to freely articulate their unique perspectives and use their gifts in roles of leadership and responsibility.

Welcome and Inclusivity:

Welcome and inclusivity was the second most prominent theme to emerge from the conversations. Across all the gatherings an emphasis was placed on creating more welcoming, vibrant and joy filled communities that reach out to everyone regardless of their life situation or level of faith. Special emphasis was placed on young people, families, women, children, other nationalities and those who feel most isolated or marginalised. Across all the gatherings a desire emerged for creation of a Church that moved beyond buildings and structures was articulated. Shaping a Church that respects and focuses on people and the diversity of their gifts was a strongly felt need. Community activities, both inside and outside the Church, were emphasised as a means to establish connections and foster a sense of belonging. One individual stated, “people need to know they are needed” whilst another stated, “If people don’t feel welcome, they will stray. If they feel needed and have something to offer, they will stay.”

The conversation primarily focused on the social dimensions of the Church, with calls for the development of a ‘Ministry of Hospitality’. This call included offering tea after mass, establishing welcome teams, fostering baptismal teams, preparing young couples for marriage in communities, forming youth and prayer groups, partnering with non-church groups, and forming parish visitation

teams. The importance of integrating the gifts of all the baptised was universally acknowledged, with one comment suggesting that "small groups nurture charisms". The call for developing a Church where radical hospitality was practiced echoed across all the gatherings. The Church must be a place where all feel "equal and valued". Overcoming existing prejudices and institutional inertia that leads to exclusion and marginalisation, coupled with difficulties around challenging deeply ingrained attitudes, may lead to resistance in creating such a welcoming environment. A conscious development of new structures and processes to deal with these obstacles is needed.

Co- Responsibility:

The findings highlight a desire for all members of the parish to be actively involved and co-responsible for the life of the church. This includes a call for more education on what baptism and co-responsibility entail, emphasising that everyone has gifts to contribute. One participant called for the "releasing of the talents and charisms of the people" whilst another commented on a "lack lustre attitude towards the gifts". There is an acknowledgement that a Synodal Church will take a long time to build and that implementing and engraining co-responsibility represents a complex task due to the clerical and hierarchical nature of the Church. The relative success of the regional gatherings has shown a strong desire for a participatory Church where every member feels called to actively participate in the Church's life and mission. Realising this vision will require a much deeper understanding of baptism and the development of spiritual practices and communities grounded in prayer. Critically, formation in practices of discernment will be important.

There is a growing recognition that the role of clergy must evolve to meet the challenges of the present day. Given the lack of vocations to the priesthood and an aging presbyterate, there is a strong concern for the future of the Church. Laity must be allowed to bear responsibility alongside clergy and be empowered to fulfil their baptismal calling. This transformation is seen as vital for creating a culture where everyone's gifts are valued and utilised. Widespread recognition of the importance of targeted formation and education that goes beyond personal development has emerged. Formation and education must be orientated towards co-responsibility and not just personal development. In reflecting on the data from each of the gatherings a question emerges around the capacity to imagine and create a truly synodal Church. This may be due to a lack of engagement or willingness to take on responsibility due to fatigue and a sense of disillusionment with the Church's direction. Co-responsibility won't happen without formation. The need to understand the baptismal call and vocation is crucial because this call comes through the Holy Spirit directly from God.

Outreach – A Church with a Missionary Impulse:

Gatherings focused on revitalising the Church's missionary impulse by extending its reach beyond traditional boundaries to touch the lives of those on the peripheries and those outside the church

community. This vision calls for innovative approaches to evangelisation that prioritise encounters with people where they are at on their life's journey. Those consulted expressed a desire for a vibrant welcoming Church that is attractive to all, especially those who have felt alienated from faith communities. One participant asked, "How do we break down barriers?" There was a heartfelt wish to pass on the gift of faith and a sense that by adopting non-judgmental methods, the Church could become more open to genuine encounter and dialogue, allowing individuals to experience the sincerity of those who live their faith with conviction. Such methods could help people who have grown lukewarm in their faith to develop a new relationship with God.

Women:

It is clear from the gatherings that the Church must do more than just recognise, and acknowledge, the significant contributions of women to the Church. Those consulted recognised the important role played by women in facilitating the transmission of faith across generations. The absence of female deacons was raised and calls for more formal ecclesiastical roles for women were heard. The need for a greater involvement of women in the Church's decision-making processes reflects a desire for enhanced respect and equality. The inclusion of women on pastoral councils represents a positive step but there was a sense that this was not enough. Expanding women's roles allowing them to become deacons and to preach were some of the suggestions to emerge. The emphasis on engaging families and youth in faith activities highlights the critical role of women as educators and nurturers within the family and community. The challenge of clericalism and navigating existing hierarchical structures were seen as significant barriers to integrating women's gifts into the life of the Church.

Prayer Filled, Spirit Filled, Synodal Community:

Liturgy, prayer, and spirituality were seen as central to community life and essential for bringing individuals together in a shared mission. Family participation in the liturgical life of the Church was seen as important and a desire to develop a communal approach to worship was articulated. Parish prayer groups, adoration, and other initiatives were viewed as ways to extend spirituality beyond the context of formal liturgical celebrations. Liturgical music, and liturgical celebrations that were inclusive of the entire community were acknowledged as essential. A sense emerged from the gatherings that enhanced spiritual and liturgical practices could foster a deeper experience of connection among Church members. The greatest challenge to realising such a reality was the absence of the people needed to build such a community. Addressing these challenges will require a collective effort to cultivate a community deeply rooted in prayer, open to spiritual renewal, and committed to fostering a more inclusive and vibrant community.

Section 2

Testimony of the Work Carried Out:

In the consultation for the Universal Synod, *For a Synodal, Church, Communion, Participation and Mission*, the Archdiocese used a combination of small parish gatherings and large diocesan assemblies. While this worked well it was felt that we should consult at a regional level going forward. We identified five regions for this purpose. The goal of these gatherings was to foster deeper reflection and provide more people with the chance to engage in facilitated synodal processes. We used this regional model to revisit our diocesan synthesis during October and November 2023 to identify priorities for future pastoral planning. This format was very successful and we utilised it once more for the February and March discussions on "A Synodal Church in Mission." In preparation for these five regional meetings an open invitation was extended with a specific request that at least 5 attendees from each parish be members of the Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Finance Committees.

Experiences Lived and Good Practice:

Synod Core Group

The Archdiocese of Armagh's ability to engage meaningfully with the Universal, National and Local synodal processes has been facilitated by the development of a strong synodal core group. The time and effort taken to accompany and form this group has paid dividends in relation to our ability to tackle the not insignificant workload involved in developing a synodal reality. The group is composed of lay, religious and ordained members that have strong, but diverse theological, pastoral and ministerial experience. The balance that has been struck with the Synod Core Group has led to an effective and prayer filled way of working and reflecting.

Conversation in the Spirit

The Archdiocese of Armagh has utilised the "Conversation in the Spirit" methodology for fruitful listening sessions. This method has been increasingly used by various groups within the archdiocese including the Synod Core Group, Diocesan Pastoral Council, Council for Priests, and Vicar Foranes. The methodology has been effective in addressing challenging pastoral issues and in encouraging parishes to work together in pastoral areas. Moving forward, the archdiocese feels it is important that a greater number of people experience this way of discerning and making decisions. Simply experiencing this methodology seems to result in a change of perspective in the individuals and communities involved.

Deeper Listening to the Clergy/Clergy Wellbeing

During local and national listening processes concern emerged in relation to clergy wellbeing and their absence from synodal processes. Our own synthesis articulated "a deep appreciation of the important role the priest played in the local community" yet concern for the welfare and care of clergy was also expressed. Criticism emerged mainly from a desire for increased community involvement

among all the baptised. There was a strong call for priests and deacons to be freer to perform the work of development and faith formation they were ordained to do.

Considering this, a process of reflection on clergy wellbeing was initiated in the summer of 2023. In November 2023 two priests from the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit (MSPS) visited the Archdiocese of Armagh. The priests work with the Rougier Foundation which assists priests who are experiencing crisis in their ministry. They also work in the area of ecclesial discernment, ecclesial change, and formation. Along with a religious sister they led a clergy gathering centred on wellbeing and priestly ministry. They stayed for a further ten days after the gathering meeting individual priests and various diocesan groups such as the Diocesan Pastoral Council and Synod Core Group. This exercise has proven to be a fruitful one and the feedback provided by the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit has offered fresh insight and clarity. The work of responding to this feedback is ongoing and will develop over the coming months and years.

The Role of Popular Devotions and Prayer in a Synodal Church

The Archdiocese of Armagh has promoted prayer as a constituent component of its synodal processes and has had the privilege to receive the relic of Carlo Acutis in St. Patrick's Cathedral Armagh. More recently it has commenced a year dedicated to celebrating the life and legacy of St. Brigid and during Lent 2024 called for 1000 hours of adoration for vocations to the priesthood. The power of popular devotion to draw diverse people of all ages and backgrounds has been striking and it must be recognised that this kind of prayer plays a significant role in building a synodal Church because it serves as a unifying force, facilitating personal expressions of faith, and acting as an interface with those on the peripheries of the Church. Popular devotions, such as pilgrimages and the veneration of saints foster a sense of belonging and community among believers and encourage active participation in the Church's life.

Ecumenics

Given the strong inter church relationships that exist in the Archdiocese of Armagh it was surprising that Ecumenics was not mentioned in grassroots synodal listening. To this end the Archdiocese of Armagh is hosting an inter church gathering on the 25th of April 2024 to reflect on synodality and what inter church networks in Ireland can offer a synodal Church. Existing relationships are central to the planning process for this gathering and a separate report will be submitted at a later date.

Facilitative leadership training

Seven Delegates from the Archdiocese were registered for Synodal Leadership Training facilitated by the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland.